



ANNUAL REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Office of Education Ombuds | 2023-2024

Letter to the Honorable

Jay Inslee, Governor of Washington

Chris Reykdal, Superintendent of Public Instruction

Randy Spaulding, Executive Director of the State Board of Education

Members of the Legislature

Thank you for the opportunity to serve the 1,073,794 K-12 students in Washington State. Our office fills an important role of supporting students and families, educators, and the public in ensuring students can access their Washington State constitutionally guaranteed public education.

We understand the gravity of this work. This year we know of three current or former clients, all students of color, who died due to preventable situations. I don't write this to call for sympathy—sympathy doesn't solve problems. Students deserve whole and well communities to obtain their education. The responsibility of fostering and perpetuating whole and healthy communities is a responsibility that belongs to all of us. The recommendations listed in this report will help to move systems to serving students in better ways. I sincerely hope to never have to write about losing students again in an annual report; K-12 education is about launching youth into their grown lives.

In 2023-24 we managed 1,400 cases. This represents a 15% increase over the previous fiscal year.

INCREASE OF
15%
CASES IN 2023-24

Within these cases are stories of students from across the state who needed help accessing public education. Sometimes the questions were straightforward – how to find a key piece of information, or help understanding education jargon. In many other cases, the questions were complex, and the solution involved bringing multiple people together to find solutions. Our Ombuds are skilled, knowledgeable, and patient in supporting parents to ensure their problems are understood and resolved.

It's my hope this report and the recommendations (pages 3-7) lay out some potential solutions to address some of the problems clients bring to us. Preventing problems is the more ethical and effective way of providing education. Thank you for your support of the students we work with and we look forward to your continued partnership.

Erin Okuno
Director



RECOMMENDATIONS

OEO aggregates client information, trends, and data to come up with policy recommendations. These recommendations are made in consideration of the complaints we received and thinking about ways to prevent future problems.

Overarching recommendations

- Provide educators with high quality training and support around child development, family engagement and communicating with families of color, trauma informed practices. The goal is to support students by having educators adjusting their teaching practices to create inclusive learning environment for students – especially BIPOC students, students experiencing homelessness, juvenile justice involved, immigrant, in foster or kinship care, involved with other support systems, and students with disabilities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

OEO aggregates the calls and information we receive to come up with recommendations for policy considerations. These recommendations will hopefully help to alleviate and prevent future problems.

Addressing violence and gun violence prevention

- Access to legally purchased and illegally procured guns is negatively impacting student's experiences and student's ability to learn. The prevalence of guns is creating unsafe environments inside and outside of schools. OEO recommends policymakers address gun access to improve the educational experience of students, educators, families, and the community.
- Gun culture is so prevalent students and educators are on hyper alert. This translates into students, especially students of color, being disciplined for behaviors as simple as making finger guns, gun sounds, unfounded or perceived threats related to guns, etc. OEO recommends dealing with gun access and gun violence overall to lower the prevalence of gun culture in schools and communities.
- Provide violence prevention and gang intervention training for school staff in community minded, non-punitive ways. Work with community-based organizations to holistically address community and student violence. Funding to make this possible needs to be prioritized at all levels of education funding.



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Increase options for students who need intensive interventions to continue their education

- Increase options for students who need intensive interventions, including in-state residential education options. This will allow students to remain closer to home and provide more cost-effective options for school districts versus out of state placements. OEO's recommendation is always to keep students in school and to increase access in the least restrictive environment, however if a student needs an out of school placement, we urge the placements to be as close to their home as possible and for the shortest amount of time needed.
- Increase oversight, transparency, and accountability around programs that serve the most vulnerable K-12 students – non-public agencies, ESD schools/programs, contracted services, and other programs that students are being placed into. Currently there is little public accountability over some of these educational placements and parents are unsure of where to turn for help.
- Students exiting in-patient medical treatment, including students in Children in Long-term Inpatient Program (CLIP) care, need stronger support transitioning back into K-12 public schools – including working with schools to create flexible school schedules to allow for continued medical treatments and to stay on track to attain school credits.
- Provide mental health training and supports to school staff to address school avoidance and refusal.



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Increase support for students with disabilities

- Shorten the timeline for IEP evaluations to be completed. OEO receives a high percentage of calls from parents asking about how to get their students evaluated for IEP services. A shorter timeline could help to help students to start receiving services quicker.
- Incentivize special education evaluations taking place outside of the traditional school year, targeting summer break, to allow students to start the school year with special education supports in place.
- Increase support for inclusion practices in schools for students with disabilities, versus pull-out services.
- Support for students with IEPs who are transitioning into kindergarten. Clearer uniform processes across the state and clear points of contact to ensure students' needs are met when they enter school.



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Support educators in understanding how to deescalate students

- Provide educators with support around child development, trauma informed practices, understanding on how to adjust their teaching methods to create inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities and keep classroom conflicts at bay.
- Eliminate isolation in schools, instead investing in training, research, and supporting culture change in schools that create healthier alternatives to isolation.

Attendance

- Have clearer processes and understanding for concerned family and community members to report students not enrolled or attending school on a regular basis. This is important to find and retain students who may have 'disappeared' during the pandemic or could be at risk for child abuse or neglect. Build strong relationships with community-based organizations in this effort.





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*The full report and previous reports are located at:

<https://www.oeo.wa.gov/en/about-us/publications-and-resources-families>

Washington State
Governor's Office of the

**Education
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We listen. We inform. We help solve problems.

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